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## **The Presidential Primary in Puerto Rico**

BY CARLOS ROMERO BARCELÓ

One of the most-often-heard arguments against voting in the Democratic presidential primary held in Puerto Rico was how meaningless and what a waste of time it was to participate in the selection of the presidential candidate when we are disenfranchised U.S. citizens. Why should we vote in the primary when we can't vote to elect the candidate we help to nominate?

At first glance, the argument seems unassailable. However, upon participating in the process and analyzing its positive and negative results, one must conclude it definitely has a positive outcome. If not for everyone, it is certainly positive for Puerto Rico and those of us who want to solve our status dilemma.

There hasn't been a referendum or plebiscite held in Puerto Rico, or congressional hearing on Puerto Rico's status as part of the U.S., or conference, or United Nations hearing that has made our fellow citizens in all 50 states more aware that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, yet denied their right to vote and representation just because they reside in Puerto Rico, than the recent Democratic presidential primary.

The Democratic presidential primary made the nation more aware than ever of our undemocratic relationship with the 50 states. The primary not only increased the nation's awareness of this relationship but also added to Puerto Ricans' awareness of how important it is to participate in presidential elections and elect our representatives to the House and the Senate of the nation in which we are citizens.

Although the Carter-Kennedy primary brought out the largest number of voters who ever participated in a presidential primary in Puerto Rico, the status issue and undemocratic relationship weren't underscored as very important issues. During that primary, only Kennedy made a short visit to Puerto Rico; Carter never came. Neither of them made commitments to specific issues, such as education, health, public safety, job creation or other economic issues, as both Democratic candidates did in this primary campaign.

Hillary Clinton, in particular, made very specific commitments to the people of Puerto Rico. As for the status issue, she couldn't have been clearer. In a document she issued—under her signature—to the people of Puerto Rico, she stated: “I believe all people should have the right to vote and the right to representation at all levels of government.” In other words, even though she specifically didn't mention statehood or independence, she validated her belief in democracy and emphasized that she does not support any form of government in which its citizens aren't guaranteed the right to vote and elect representatives to all levels of their government. This statement by Hillary Clinton regarding our political and constitutional relationship with the 50 states is one that

undoubtedly would have been endorsed by Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson and Truman.

The primary not only helped put the lack of democracy in our relationship with the 50 states at the top of our list of concerns with the White House and Congress, but also demonstrated to the nation and Puerto Rico how much discrimination still exists in funding for some federal programs appropriated to the states and Puerto Rico. It is precisely because of the discrimination against the medically indigent in Puerto Rico that Hillary Clinton pledged to enforce equality in Medicaid if elected.

Not only did she pledge equality in Medicaid, but she also agreed to support eliminating discrimination in federal funding for children's education as well as to increase funding for public safety.

Everywhere Hillary Clinton spoke in Puerto Rico, she pointed out the inequality in federal funding and her commitment to equality. By addressing these issues in nationally televised activities, she brought to the nation's attention the unequal treatment accorded Puerto Rico.

At the same time, her commitments forced Obama to make specific commitments to help resolve some of Puerto Rico's problems. She forced Obama to focus on Puerto Rico as never before in his political career.

On the other hand, McCain—whose nomination already had been decided and, therefore, didn't need to campaign for votes here—has said very little, if anything, about solving Puerto Rico's issues.

The events during the primaries and their effects on the candidates demonstrated to the people of Puerto Rico the impact of the vote and the importance of the awareness of presidential candidates on the issues that affect us. Puerto Ricans have realized more than ever how much more we could participate in the economic development of our nation if we were a state and had the right, not only to elect the president, but to vote to elect six members of the House and two senators.

It is no wonder that the most recent poll by a major newspaper in Puerto Rico showed support for statehood has soared to 57%, whereas support for "Commonwealth" has plummeted to less than 40%. Never since the territory was renamed "Commonwealth" in 1952 has support for "Commonwealth" diminished so much, or support for statehood increased so much.

People finally have witnessed and understood how important it is to have the right to vote and to be represented by elected officials. If candidates come to Puerto Rico to convince voters to vote for them in a primary and make commitments such as those made by Hillary, how more often and how many more commitments would candidates make during an election for president? Obviously, if we are U.S. citizens, we must participate

in the democratic process if we want political and economic equality. That is what the system is all about.

If raising awareness for the need to achieve political and economic equality were all we had gained from participating in the Democratic presidential primary, it would have been a very important and significant achievement. However, we gained much more.

The presidential primary in Puerto Rico received enormous publicity in the nation's media and most, if not all, was very positive. The positive image of the presidential debate and primary process in Puerto Rico has helped reduce the negative publicity that Acevedo Vilá's corruption and outrageous refusal to resign from office has given our beloved island. The fact he manipulated and extorted the leadership of his own party to become accomplices to his corruption not only has reduced substantially the confidence in the trustworthiness and reliability of our government politically but also financially.

The primary has given us some relief from the incredibly bad reputation of Acevedo Vilá's administration throughout the nation. A change in administration with Fortuño's election in November will give us the needed support to begin to regain the faith and trustworthiness we enjoyed before Sila Calderón and Acevedo Vilá were elected.

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